BRILL

Numen 58 (2011) 344–374

NVMEN
brill.nl/nu

Cultural Memory of the Pious Ancestors (*Salaf*) in al-Ghazālī

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Abstract
The superiority and truth of the way of the first few generations of Muslims, the *salaf*, has been a key theological premise of Sunni Islam, which Sunni *ʿulamāʾ* have tried to defend against incursions of intellectual sophistication as well as foreign systems of reasoning and spirituality. However, they have also been attracted by the promises of greater intellectual coherence, sophistication, or ultimate truths that other traditions seemed to offer to a remarkable and underappreciated extent. Al-Ghazālī, an iconic defender of the intellectualist branch of Sunni tradition (Ashʿarism) against challenges posed by rationalist theologians (Muʿtazilites), Aristotelian philosophers, and Neoplatonist Batinites, attempted to synthesize these various traditions, and in the process, struggled with the cultural memory of the *salaf*. His attempts at resolution ranged from the projection of a selective and romanticized view of the *salaf* as proto-mystics, neglect and implicit deprecation of the *salaf* in his mysticial writings, and finally a qualified return to the *salaf*'s way in his last treatise. Although he never seems to settle on a stable alternative to the Sunni teleology in which the *salaf* always came out on top, he consistently resorts to esotericism and elitism whenever attempting to transcend the *salaf*. Such tensions and attempts at resolution continue to characterize subsequent intellectualist Sunni tradition.

Keywords
Islam, al-Ghazālī, *salaf*, progress, cultural memory

Introduction

The cultural memory of early Muslims has been crucial in Islam as a constituent of the salvific tradition of divine truth. In the Sunni

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DOI: 10.1163/156852711X562344

tradition, the designation *salaf*, lit., predecessors or forefathers, is applied to the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad and the following two or three generations, referred to here as the "early *salaf*," and secondarily, as an honorary extension, to those greats in the following few generations who have been canonized as having perfectly preserved and embodied the example of these early Muslims, designated here as the "later *salaf*" (see EI² 1960–2006, s.v. "al-*Salaf wa'l-Khalaf*" by E. Chaumont). While this essay focuses on the memory of the *salaf* in one major strand of the Sunni tradition, the Shiʿite tradition is no less defined by the memory of its pious predecessors, the *imams*. Rainer Brunner's excellent article has already begun to explore the mechanisms of cultural memory among the Shiʿite Akhbārīs (Brunner 2005). In this essay, I focus on the Sunni tradition, but not its *ahl al-ḥadīth* or the Hanbalite branch, who saw themselves as the chief defenders of the tradition of the *salaf* and are obvious candidates for such inquiry. Rather, I pay attention to the Sunni scholastics, the scholars of *kalām* (literally "discourse;" often translated as "rational theology" but better understood in its historical context as a particular type of discourse in Islam whose legitimacy has been deeply contested and whose purpose has remained primarily apologetic; see EI² 1960–2006, s.v. "*ʿIlm al-Kalām*" by L. Gardet) and in particular the Ashʿarites, who saw as their *raison d'être* the intellectual defense of Sunni Islam. Some have suggested a distinction between, on the one hand, the *salafiyya*, a tendency in Islam, modern and ancient, which actively endeavors to recreate the ideal past, and, on the other, "genuine traditionalism," based on "a confident reliance on the past" which deals with inevitable changes by "neutraliz[ing] the evolutionary effects." While a distinction between the two tendencies is plausible, this characterization of either tendency is difficult to accept. The present essay examines the second, synthesizing and neutralizing tendency, the so-called "genuine traditionalism," and suggests a different picture. Torn between intellectual pull from various foreign systems of thought and explicitly committed to defending the tradition of the *salaf*, this tendency offers us a privileged opportunity to investigate the issue of the cultural memory of the early golden age in Islam in particular, and the mechanisms and challenges of maintaining cultural memory more generally. In particular, in this essay I investigate the role of elitism and hierarchy in the structure of

participation in cultural memory, which Jan Assmann has pointed out is concerned with preservation, and suggest how this mechanism may serve not only to preserve but also to transform and manipulate cultural memory (Assmann 2008:114–115).

In a tradition like Islam, defined by moments of divine intervention in human history in a sacred past, that past remains in some ways unsurpassable by definition. The preservation, interpretation, and construction of cultural memory constitute central tasks for the religious elite, which is made even more significant in Islam due to the self-conscious emphasis on the historicity and preservation of Islam's scripture, the Qurʾān. And yet, Islam's worldly success in spawning a durable civilization led to a paradox: the increasing intellectual sophistication which resulted partly from internal evolution and partly in response to contacts with, incorporation of, and challenges from new systems of thought rendered the maintenance of the cultural memory of the sacred past a rich and complex enterprise. An investigation of how the intellectual defenders of orthodoxy deal with the memory of the early, pristine figures — the *salaf* — allows us to understand how the prospects of progress, development, and the surpassing of the past have been negotiated. This is a particularly fascinating problem in contemporary Islamic cultures, where the tug of war between the memory of the *salaf*, on the one hand, and modernity, which has made progress a universal desideratum, on the other, is far from over.

In order to understand the problems involved in maintaining the cultural memory of the *salaf*, I examine the writings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazāli (d. 1111; henceforth Ghazālī) — known as *Ḥujjat al-Islām* (the "Proof of Islam") — seen by many as the most influential scholar of pre-modern Islam, whose complex attitude towards the *salaf* as exemplified in his ambivalent defense of *kalām* is most fruitful to examine not only because of his formative influence on the subsequent Islamic tradition but also because he most poignantly exemplified the synthetic spirit that made for an increasingly complex relationship with that memory.

Despite the abundant attention that Ghazālī has received in traditional as well as modern scholarship, scholars are deeply divided about him, the credit for which at least partly goes to himself. The reasons are threefold: his puzzlingly multiple commitments and engagements —

whether they can be synthesized into a coherent system remains a contested question; his esotericism and elitism, which apparently allowed him to teach different things to different audiences, and which are often hard to reconcile; and finally, the intellectual crises and development evident in his vast oeuvre, the understanding of which is only complicated by his own "autobiography."[1] Furthermore, a theologian's attitude towards the *salaf* was a major defining issue in Islam that decided his or her orthodoxy, and any Sunni theologians aspiring to transcend (what they took to be) the *salaf*'s way in religion had to justify such transgression to their contemporaries and to themselves. Investigating such attitudes cannot be a matter of simple piecemeal reading but requires understanding the general system of thought, cutting through camouflage, and reconstructing implications. Any satisfactory interpretation of Ghazālī's attitude towards the *salaf* will, therefore, have to adopt a general framework for the interpretation of all of Ghazālī's thought.

In order to examine further Ghazālī's dilemma, its trajectory, as well as the over-all nature of the problem of maintaining or manipulating the cultural memory of the *salaf* in the Sunni tradition, I illuminate Ghazālī's attitude towards the *salaf* by comparing it with that of Shāh Walī Allāh (d. *ca.* 1762), another great Sunni theologian, mystic, and jurist of great repute. I treat him rather briefly, but his relatively bold and stable attitude towards the memory of the *salaf* nonetheless serves as an instructive contrast with that of Ghazālī.

In the following, I will give a brief history of *kalām* and its position vis-à-vis the *salaf*, thus contextualizing Ghazālī's project, then offer an interpretation of it, situating it in modern scholarship on the subject, and finally offer a comparison with Walī Allāh's approach.

Ghazālī, Kalām, and the *Salaf*

Like the other two Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Christianity, the major intellectual drama in Islamic civilization was fuelled by the encounter between Jerusalem/Mecca and Athens — between those who

[1] Griffel 2009 is the most recent comprehensive attempt to present a coherent view of Ghazālī's cosmology; see Griffel 2009:20ff. for the problematic nature of Ghazālī's "autobiography" in his *Munqidh*.

believed in the truth of the revelation of a personal, omnipotent, and omniscient God and those who subscribed to Greek philosophy or its legacy traditions, in which God, if there was one, served as merely the First Cause of the otherwise intellectually determinable universe. The problem of the origins of systematic rational speculation on God and human beings and their respective agencies, captured in the dialectic discourse which acquired the label *kalām* in early Islam, has vexed many. From an historical perspective, whether *kalām* was exogenous or endogenous to Islam appears to be an irresolvable problem, for which the answers proposed depend more on the definitions and philosophical presumptions of an inquiry than on historical evidence (Hourani 1976; Watt 1973:182ff.). For the present inquiry, it is sufficient to note that the place or authority of *kalām* discourse is one of the key issues in defining the cultural memory of early Islam. Generally speaking, of the four major religious discourses in Islamic civilization, *ḥadīth* (lit., report), *fiqh* (jurisprudence; lit., understanding), *kalām*, and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), the tension with the cultural memory of the *salaf* has been most explicitly encountered in the last two. At first, *kalām* was strictly rejected by the *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* scholars; in fact, this loosely connected "proto-Sunni" group of scholars may be better defined by its rejection of *kalām* in favor of continuity with the way of the Prophet and the early community than by any distinctive set of shared doctrines (EI^2 1960–2006, s.v. "*ʿIlm al-kalām*" by L. Gardet).

By the tenth century, the methodological apparatus of *kalām* had been adopted and adapted by Sunni theologians in defense of Sunni Islam against rationalist theologians, the Muʿtazilites, and the Shiʿites (van Ess 1965–1966:138). The most important factor of all for the formation and development of Sunni *kalām* was the intellectual challenge of the rationalist theology advocated by the Muʿtazila, which provided both the main target as well as the intellectual toolset for Sunni *kalām*. The "inquisition" (*miḥna*) of Ibn Ḥanbal backed by the rationalists and the eventual triumph of the unassuming traditionalist had caused their fall from grace, but their intellectual demise did not automatically follow; it was accomplished by the Ashʿarites. That in the process both the early Islamic doctrines and the *kalām* methods were inevitably transformed is hardly disputable, although the nature of this transformation, the extent of the accord of Ashʿarite theology with the

understanding of the *salaf*, and the rigor and integrity of its dialectic methods, have remained fiercely debated. The *ḥadīth* group, which at the time stood at the core of the emerging Sunni orthodoxy and became identified starting in the fourth/tenth century primarily as the Ḥanbalite school, rejected not only the enemy but also his methods, including al-Ashʿari's intellectual defense (Makdisi 1981; Melchert 1997). Ashʿarism was therefore born as multiply apologetic: it needed to justify its orthodoxy vis-à-vis scripture to the conservative Sunni core (*ḥadīth* group), its rationality against the Muʿtazilites, and its political narrative against the Shiʿites. The Sunni tradition, which in its formative phase had been anti-*kalām*, was now divided into *kalām* and anti-*kalām* camps.

The bone of contention between the *ḥadīth* party and the Muʿtazilites had been the interpretation of divine attributes in the Qurʾān, which also had implications for the issues of predestination and causality. The Ashʿarites saw themselves as standing between, on the one hand, the rationalists, who denied divine attributes (a position its proponents described as *tanzīh*, "upholding God's transcendence," and detractors as *nafī* or *taʿṭīl*, "denial of divine attributes") and, on the other hand, the *ḥadīth* group, now chiefly the Ḥanbalites, who affirmed them (hence called themselves *ahl al-ithbāt*, affirmers of God's attributes "without asking how" [*bilā kayf*], but denigrated by their detractors as Ḥashwiyya or Mujassima, anthropomorphists; see EI² 1960–2006, s.v. "*Tashbīh wa-Tanzīh*" by J. van Ess).

The Ashʿarites increasingly leaned towards their rationalist interlocutors, as evident progressively in the writings of al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarī (d. *ca.* 990), Abū Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 1013), and al-Baghdādi (d. 1037). Starting in the eleventh century, with the emergence of loyal Ashʿarites like al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066) in the domains of *ḥadīth* and Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) in Sufism, Ashʿarism began to stabilize and expand as a school (Maḥmūd 1994:586; Subḥī 1982:93). A notable contribution of Sufi writers like al-Qushayrī to Ashʿarism was increased inclination towards elitism and esotericism in the spiritual and social domains (Anjum 2009; Karamustafa 2007:116–119). Around the same time, the emergence of Neoplatonist Aristotelian philosophy as a rival on the religious scene, especially with Avicenna (d. 1037), posed a formidable threat not only to Sunni doctrines but

also to the very idea of a personal God, and increasingly replaced Muʿtazilism as the chief threat and interlocutor. It was not until Ghazālī, however, that the full impact of these mystical and philosophical doctrines was felt in *kalām*.

Ghazālī's teacher, Abūʾl-Maʿāli al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), was one of the major turning points in the history of Ashʿarism, daringly critical of the earlier Ashʿarite masters for their inconsistency and thoroughly aware of and influenced by the Muʿtazilite tradition. Perhaps since the Muʿtazilites no longer posed a threat (outside of Shiʿism, that is), Juwaynī did not shy away from drawing nearer to their position in key theoretical issues (Juwaynī 1981:1.277; Maḥmūd 1994:612ff.). Thus, even though nominal rivalry on token issues continued, the Ashʿarites had come full circle with respect to the Muʿtazilite doctrines, based on whose methods and vocabulary and against whose positions they had begun as a school.

Among the Ashʿarites, the idea of having transcended the *salaf* in knowledge, sophistication, and clarity is clearest in Juwaynī. In *al-Kāfiya fiʾl-jadal*, he wrote:

> [The *salaf*] realized that there will be after them those whom God will choose for excellence in endeavor, greater understanding, perspicacity and intelligence … they therefore did not engage in depth (with contentious issues) and remained brief and satisfied with allusions. (Juwaynī 1979:346–347)

Late in life, however, Juwaynī's opinion regarding the intellectual capacity and perspicacity of the early Muslims (*salaf*) seems to have changed. In *Ghiyāth al-umam*, he makes an impassioned plea to follow the early Muslims who were superior is every respect.

> [The *salaf*] forbade indulging in ambiguities and hair-splitting of confusing issues… sophistry in responses to questions, focusing rather on encouraging people towards piety, benevolence, not harming others, and being obedient to God according to one's capacity.… They were the most intelligent of people and best in speech. (Juwaynī 1981:190–191)

In *al-Niẓāmiyya*, the last of his works, Juwaynī professes to have reverted to the "way of the *salaf*" which he describes as *tafwīḍ* (quoted in Maḥmūd 1994:618). Furthermore, his traditional biographers consis-

tently inform us that towards the end of his life, he would regret his engagement with philosophy and *kalām* and desire for the "faith of the old women of Nishapur:" "Be my witness that I have retracted every opinion that opposes the Sunna, and I die upon the creed of the old women of Nishapur!" (Dhahabī 1992:XVIII, 463–474; Maḥmūd 1994:632; Subkī 1905:V, 191).

These reports give a sense of nostalgic longing for the pristine and unintellectual faith of the *salaf* after having been enticed by *kalām*, a sense which is generally consistent with Juwaynī's well-attested writings.

Apparently not heeding his master's warnings, Ghazālī delved deeply into not only *kalām* but philosophy, systematically advancing the use of syllogism and philosophical concepts in his defense of the Ashʿarite doctrines that his master had inaugurated. The philosophers and the Batinites become not only his main interlocutors and rivals but were also, given his synthetic impulse, incorporated in complex ways into his own thought.

In his magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Sciences of Religion*), Ghazālī could report from a certain distance that *kalām* was strictly prohibited and condemned by "the *imams* of the *salaf*" like Mālik (d. 795), Abū Yūsuf (d. 798), al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820), and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and "all of the *ḥadīth* scholars." It would seem from the opening of his *al-Risālat al-qudsiyya*, incorporated as one of the earliest books of the *Iḥyāʾ*, that he shared the *salaf*'s view on the issue. Regarding how to instill proper faith in the heart of believers since young age, he writes,

> One should do one's utmost to protect oneself from hearing anything of disputation (*jadal*) and *kalām*… Compare the belief (*ʿaqīda*) of the people of piety and righteousness among the commoners with the belief of a *kalām* scholar or one who engages in (scholarly) disputations, and you will find that the belief of the commoner in its stability is like a lofty mountain which is not shaken by any earthquake or thunder, while the belief of the *mutakallim* who guards his belief with the categories of disputations is like a thread hanging loose in the wind which the breeze bends now in one direction now in another. The only exception [to this weakening of faith] is someone who hears from a *mutakallim* a proof of an article of faith and then holds fast to that proof without argument (*taqlīd*[an]) just as he holds fast to that article of faith without argument. (Ghazālī 2004: I, 127)

However, after this clear statement on the harms of *kalām*, Ghazālī addresses whether "the learning of *jadal* (disputation) and *kalām* is blameworthy." Having listed several statements by major figures among the (later) *salaf* condemning *kalām*, he deems these too simplistic and sweeping and contends that *kalām* is only a tool which could be put to good or evil uses; it is nothing but a natural response to the increasingly demanding intellectual opposition to the truth in changing times, nothing but the employment of legitimate reason to the articles of faith. Had the Companions (i.e., the early *salaf*) needed it, they would have employed it. Ghazālī moves on to wrap up this discourse by giving a list of pros and cons of *kalām*. He writes:

> [In the use of *kalām*] there is benefit and there is harm, and it is prohibited when or where it is harmful. Its harm is that it raises doubts and shakes beliefs, dislodging them from certitude and firmness. That is what occurs in the beginning, and the restitution of [the earlier state of certitude] is ever doubtful, and it is different for different people. This is the harm of *kalām* for the people of the True Creed [namely, the Sunnis]. It has another harm for the heretical innovators, which is to reassure them in their innovative heresies and install them firmly in their hearts, for *kalām* incites them and sharpens their appetite to insist on these heresies. (Ghazālī 2004:I, 127)

In addition to the inciting of doubts, *kalām*'s reliance on disputation, apologetics, and polemics rather than on fundamental rational principles appears to be one major disqualifying weakness in Ghazālī's view. As for its benefit:

> It might be supposed [by some] that its benefit is the unveiling of the ultimate truths and the knowledge of their exact nature. Alas, *kalām* does not deliver this noble promise. It may be that confusion and misguidance in it are greater than any unveiling or attainment of knowledge. If you heard this from a *ḥadīth* scholar (*muḥaddith*) or a Ḥashwī, you might think that people are simply enemies of what they do not know. But hear this from someone who has known *kalām* by experience and detested it after having known its reality and after having been completely submerged into it, and gone beyond it to delve into other sciences of its kind, and has finally reached the conclusion that *the path to the realities of knowledge are shut from this direction.* By my life, *kalām* is not below unveiling, defining or explaining a matter or two, but rarely does it help in case of clear matters that are almost better understood before delving into the arguments of *kalām*! (Ghazālī 2004:I, 131)

Ghazālī's rejection of *kalām*'s efficacy in procuring faith, he wishes to show, is in spite of all his sympathy as an insider. He is at pains here to distance himself from the simple-minded *ḥadīth* group, the Hanbalites, and other groups lumped under the derogatory label Ḥashwiyya. This would lead us to expect a prohibition of *kalām* by Ghazālī after the way of the *salaf*. But that is not what we read next:

> But its benefit is only one: the guarding of the creed that we have previously elaborated for the common people, and protecting it against the heretics' skepticism by various types of disputations. For the commoner is shaken by the disputation of a heretic even if it is invalid; while confronting the invalid with the invalid repels it. (Ghazālī 2004:I, 131)

How may we understand this rather puzzling defense-cum-condemnation of *kalām*? The common righteous believer untouched by *kalām* is seen as both an immovable mount of faith yet also fickle in front of heretical disputation all at the same time; the theologian is both a soldier of faith, necessary to defend the faith of the common majority, but also fickle and weak in faith, all in the same chapter of *Iḥyāʾ*. While this contradiction may be irresolvable, the following analogy may approximate Ghazālī's attitude: *kalām* is seen here as antidote, albeit a deficient one, to the poison of skepticism, which may be harmful in itself but useful and indeed necessary only when the poison has been swallowed. Its benefit is extremely limited: to defend the unfortunate souls who have fallen into doubting and asking questions, knowing that even this antidote will never fully cure them. The right attitude of a commoner is to believe and trust, rather than understand and reproduce, the intellectual defense and explanation of the right creed provided by these (afflicted) *kalām* scholars.

The interesting question for our inquiry is why Ghazālī does not simply return to the *salaf*'s position, as his teacher Juwaynī had done, after having seen the harms of *kalām*? Why adhere to an ineffective defense, even against the recommendations of the *salaf*? Ghazālī's corpus, and his turn to Aristotelian syllogism and Neoplatonist mysticism, I argue below, can be seen as fundamentally concerned with this problem.

From Rational Theology (*kalām*) to Divine Disclosure (*mukāshafa*)

After his aforementioned ambivalent defense of *kalām*, Ghazālī goes on a few pages later in *Iḥyāʾ* to reiterate the standard Ashʿarite positions, arguing forcefully that the later *salaf*, in particular Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, were overly and naively cautious and had therefore stopped at the exoteric meanings and "closed the door" of interpretation out of fear of transgression. The Muʿtazilites, however, transgressed in divine attributes, and the philosophers went beyond all limits by denying all scriptural data. The Ashʿarite *kalām*, he implies, has got it right. However, the way to prove their position is not rational, but esoteric:

> And the line of moderation (*iqtiṣād*) between this libertarianism (*inḥilāl*) [of the Muʿtazilites and the philosophers] and the rigidity of the Hanbalites (*jumūd al-ḥanābila*) is thin and obscure, no one attains it except by God's grace, those who know these matters by divine light, not by tradition (*bi nūr ilāhi lā bi ʾl-samāʿ*). Then, after the secrets of these matters have been unveiled to them, they look at the words of the scripture, and whatever agrees with what they have observed with the light of certainty, they approve, and whatever disagrees with it, they interpret metaphorically (*fa mā wāqafa mā shāhadūhu bi nūr al-yaqīn, qarrarūhu wa mā khālafa awwalūhu*). (Ghazālī 2004:I, 139)

This passage suggests that Ghazālī continued to defend what he believed to be the crux of the Ashʿarite doctrine, and separated it from the deficiencies of *kalām* as a method. Furthermore, his turn towards mysticism was connected to his intellectual project; it was the failure of *kalām* to deliver definitive proofs and the bliss of certitude that necessitated Sufism, rather than merely a union of two useful sciences of Islam. Furthermore, the teachings of scripture were to be submitted to the judgment of the inner light and accepted or interpreted away in accordance with that judgment. Subjective experience of truth thus stood above both reason and revelation. Sufism for Ghazālī was the way to prepare the soul for the divine disclosure which brought it into direct contact with the unseen realities that exoteric rational discourse seemed unable to prove. In his post-*Iḥyāʾ* writings, he consistently privileges divine light (*nūr ilāhī*) and *mukāshafa* (literally, "the process of disclosure or unveiling;" "theophany" would be the more idiomatic option; it will be left untranslated here due to its centrality for Ghazālī) as a

third path in contradistinction to both reason and revelation. The nature of this "divine disclosure," however, is far from simple.

Few scholars now unproblematically accept Ghazālī's self-presentation in *al-Mundiqh min al-ḍalāl* ("The Rescuer from Error") as an impartial seeker of truth who fairly examined *kalām*, Batinite teachings, and philosophy, all in vain, until he found direct experiential knowledge based on divine disclosure, *mukāshafa*, in Sufism, which was the ultimate response to all his intellectual doubts. Taking seriously Ghazālī's philosophical works, Richard Frank (1994:98–99) called into question Ghazālī's Ashʿarism as well as his Sufism, underscored his debt to Avicenna and Neoplatonism, and contended that he was deliberately misleading in his profession of Ashʿarism and superficial and patchy in his philosophy. While Richard Frank's overstatement of his case for the inauthenticity of Ghazālī's Ashʿarism and Sufism has been criticized (Dallal 2002), Frank Griffel's recent work on Ghazālī's cosmology makes an impressive case that Ghazālī had worked out a coherent philosophical system which did not require abandoning (what Ghazālī considered to be) the fundamental tenets of Ashʿarite *kalām* (Griffel 2004 and especially 2009). Another scholar goes on to argue that Ghazālī's *ʿilm al-mukāshafa*, the way which he constantly put up as the ultimate truth suited for the elite of the elite, was neither purely Avicennan philosophy, as Richard Frank would have it, nor Sufism, as his traditional interpreters have understood, but an organic whole which harmonized the two (Treiger 2008). While these recent studies have persuasively argued that Ghazālī's Avicennan and Neoplatonist commitments cannot be dismissed as forged or merely linguistic borrowing, I find unpersuasive Griffel's argument that there is no difference or contradiction between Ghazālī's esoteric and exoteric teachings. While the scope does not allow a full treatment of his learned argument, which will engage the field for some time to come, I underscore the element of development and change, even reversal, in Ghazālī's position vis-à-vis the highest knowledge and the *salaf*.[2] I examine these issues in three widely

[2] Griffel 2009:286, arguing for a coherent picture of Ghazālī's cosmology, writes: "Often, assigning esotericism to an author or referring to inconsistencies in a textual corpus is a hermeneutic device to mask the failure of interpreters to understand the texts." It may be so, but imposing forced coherence on thinkers of the past is no less common a problem among interpreters. The increasing consensus of scholars that

recognized phases of Ghazali's mature writings: his magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ*; the post-*Iḥyāʾ* phase of explicitly mystical writings; and finally, his last treatise, *Iljām*.

Table 1. Chronology of Ghazālī's works relevant to the present study based on Hourani 1984; Griffel 2009:19–60 presents a more detailed picture.

Years	Phase	Works composed
	Early Phase	Traditional *fiqh* and Ashʿarism
1091	Appointed chair of Niẓāmiyya at Baghdad	
1092–1095	Philosophical Phase	*Maqāsid al-falāsifa*; *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*; *Miḥakk al-naẓar*; *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*
1095	Spiritual crisis	
1095–1105	Seclusion according to *Munqidh*, writing of *Ihyāʾ*	*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*
1105–1109	Mystical and Neoplatonic writings	*Mishkāt al-anwār*; *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*; *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*
1109–1111	Back to Ṭūs, final years	*Iljām al-ʿawāmm ʿan ʿilm al-kalām*

Plato was not a systematic thinker, unlike Thomas Aquinas, for instance, who was, and that he did not consistently hold every doctrine for which he argued in his dialogues, is a more accurate picture of that canonical thinker of all philosophy and does not diminish his significance. See, for instance, Wolin 2004:61.

The *Salaf* and Divine Disclosure (*mukāshafa*) in *Iḥyāʾ*

The evident focus of *Iḥyāʾ* is to infuse the exoteric sciences with the concern for the afterlife after the pattern of the *salaf*, which Ghazālī calls the science of the hereafter (*ʿilm al-ākhira*). This science, Treiger notes, includes "the science of divine disclosure" (*ʿilm al-mukāshafa*) as well as the science of spiritual practice (*ʿilm al-muʿāmala*), and the latter prepares the soul for the former, the ultimate goal of which is the immediate knowledge, or gnosis, of God (*maʿrifat Allāh*)" (Treiger 2008:47; 337). Treiger further argues that in Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ* the concept of *mukāshafa*, already familiar in the Sufi literature, acquires "distinctive *noetics*" with its "image of the heart as a polished mirror" that have no precedence in the classical Sufi literature (Treiger 2008:54–55). One persistent theme in all of Ghazālī's spiritual literature (i.e., all of his writings including and after *Iḥyāʾ*, possibly including earlier Sufi works like *Mīzān al-ʿamal*) is his thorough-going esotericism and elitism (see Treiger 2008:55ff.). Both the noetic (that is, imparting knowledge, not mere faith or feeling) and esoteric elements of *mukāshafa* are evident in the following passage in *Iḥyāʾ*:

> [The science of disclosure, *ʿilm al-mukāshafa*] is the light that appears in the heart when it is purified and purged of its blameworthy attributes, and by virtue of that knowledge many matters of which one used to hear only the names and know only the general meaning open up to him until he acquires the knowledge of the reality of the being of God Almighty, his lasting and perfect attributes, his acts and wisdom in the creation of this world and the hereafter, and the way he has preferred the hereafter over this world, and the knowledge of the meaning of prophecy and prophethood, the meaning of revelation, of devil, of the terms such as angels and devils, the nature of devil's animosity towards men, the nature of the appearance of angels to the prophets, and the nature of the reception of revelation by the Prophets, and the knowledge of the dominion of the heavens and the earth . . . This knowledge is not written in books nor those whom God has granted some of it may speak to anyone of it except with others like them by way of reminder and with secrecy — such is the esoteric knowledge (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*). (Ghazālī 2004:I, 20–21)

Given the nature of *Iḥyāʾ* as a text written primarily for the commoners and the exoteric *ʿulamāʾ*, the elaboration of *mukāshafa* here is perhaps deliberately vague, but is elaborated in Ghazālī's more elite-oriented writings like *Mishkāt*.

Esotericism and Elitism

Esotericism and elitism are not accidental to Ghazālī's thought; they are necessitated by the nature of his intellectual project. In the move from reason to *mukāshafa* as the defense or proof of the right doctrines, a new dilemma emerges for Ghazālī. Once the subjectivity of the ultimate source of knowledge and certitude is acknowledged, how could the truth be separated from false doctrines, heresies combated, orthodoxy upheld, and the chaos of subjectivity averted? As a Sunni theologian, Ghazālī was eminently interested in that endeavor, and hence, despite his disparagement of *kalām*, he never abjured it. The age-old solution to the problem of esoteric chaos has been hierarchy, election, and elitism. In this respect Ghazālī adopted, without giving due credit, the Batinite solution, from whom he seemed to have learned not only elitism but also Neoplatonist doctrines. In his *Mīzān al-ʿamal*, written most likely after his main tract against the Batinites, *al-Mustaẓhiri* (see Hourani 1984:294–295; Mitha 2001:100–101), the spiritual stratification and difference between private and public knowledge that is the hall-mark of the Batinite doctrine and later mystical Sufis are explicitly defended:

> You might say: your discourse in this book is divided into what is in accordance with the Sufi school and what is in accordance with the Ashʿarite school and some of the *kalām* scholars — but a discourse is to be understood according to but one school. Which of these schools is the right one? How could it be understood that all of these are true (despite their contradictions)? And if a part of each is true, what is it? (Ghazālī 1964:405)

To this quandary of his seemingly multiple commitments that his students and contemporaries must have faced, Ghazālī's response is that every master (*kāmil*) has three schools (*madhhabs*): first, that which one learns from one's parents, teachers, and surroundings and for which one develops a prejudice; second, "what one adopts in one's teachings and instruction of those who come to him seeking knowledge and guidance, and this is not one thing but depends on the level of the seeker or the student — and he sees what every student is capable of understanding"; third, "what a man believes privately between himself and God Almighty and no one else but God knows about it; and he

does not mention it except to those who share the knowledge that one has, or has reached such a level that that knowledge could be received and understood by him" (Ghazālī 1964:405–409).[3] The reason for this strict secrecy is evidently the incapacity of the commoners to grasp the true beliefs of the philosopher-mystic. As noted earlier, Ghazālī does

[3] Griffel 2009:359, n. 45, states that in this oft-quoted passage of Ghazālī, on which many scholars have relied in order to understand Ghazālī's apparent self-contradictions, Ghazālī "actually rejects the described attitude." Griffel goes on to summarize Ghazālī's position: "[Ghazālī] refers to a group of scholars who express one set of teachings in public disputations, another group who express their teachings while instructing their students, and a third group who keep it secret between themselves and God. Al-Ghazālī contrasts this attitude with the position to thoroughly investigate the subject in question, to develop *one* position, and to teach that in all circumstances to all people. The latter is the attitude to be favored" (emphasis in the original). This, however, is a mistaken reading of Ghazālī's words on more than one account. Firstly, Ghazālī speaks not of three groups but of two, the first being those who hold three *madhhabs*, and the second being those who insist on having only one *madhhab*. Secondly, the multiple *madhhab* option is Ghazālī's response to the questioner's puzzlement about Ghazālī's seemingly multiple commitments; for Ghazālī to reject this option would render the whole discussion meaningless. Thirdly, Ghazālī does not favor the second position but rather says, after describing the first in four pages and the second in less than half a page, "The first group agrees with the second in that if they are asked about their *madhhab*, whether it is one or three, it is not permissible for them to say 'three'. Rather, it is obligatory to say, 'it is one'. This renders useless your tiring yourself with the question of *madhhab*. If you are intelligent, [you will see that] people agree on *professing* that the *madhhab* is one (*fa-inna al-nās muttafiqūn ʿalā al-nuṭq bi-anna al-madhhab wāḥid*)" (Ghazālī 1964:409). Then Ghazālī continues to instruct the questioner, in a clearly pedagogical tone, on a related but different issue: "[People] also are united in their prejudice for the *madhhab* of their father, teacher, or city; but what is your benefit in it, when there are so many of them around and no one has a definitive advantage? So give up worrying about *madhhabs* and seek truth through your own thinking, so that you have a *madhhab* [of your own] (*fa-jānib al-iltifāt ila al-madhāhib wa-ṭlub al-ḥaqq bi-ṭarīq al-naẓar litakūn ṣāḥib madhhab*)." It is evident that Ghazālī merely wishes to deflect his students' attention to the issue of following (*taqlīd*) others' *madhhabs*, and it is here that he instructs that the student of knowledge should develop a position of his own rather than worrying about the many contradictory opinions of others. This suggests that the reading of many more scholars, traditional and modern, that Ghazālī indeed not only favored but espoused the three-*madhhab* opinion is correct. Elitism and esotericism are writ large on practically all of his spiritual and intellectual writings.

not shy away in his *Iḥyāʾ* from using the word *bāṭin* — the linchpin of the Batinites — to characterize this highest form of knowing.

The Image of the *Salaf* in *Iḥyāʾ*

Iḥyāʾ has a curious relationship with the *salaf* in more ways than one. More than any other spiritual work of Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ* is adorned with references from the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* (the majority of the *ḥadīth* being those deemed unsound by the traditional *ḥadīth* scholars, but the Sufi-leaning romanticization of early history in these reports nonetheless serves Ghazālī's purpose well), thus suggesting that *Iḥyāʾ*'s purpose is to address the commoners, which included the exoteric scholars, and not primarily the elite. Explaining how the way of the early community has been lost, for the restoration of which *Iḥyāʾ* is composed, he writes,

> During the Caliphate after the Prophet, the Rightly Guided Caliphs were the leaders of scholars of God (*ʿulamāʾ biʾllāh*), who understood God's commands and ways, were capable of issuing independent judgments, and did not seek help from the *fuqahāʾ* except rarely and only when consultation was necessary, hence the scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) had time to devote themselves exclusively to the sciences of the hereafter, and would avoid giving legal verdicts, turning their efforts to God, as known from the accounts of their lives. (Ghazālī 2004:I, 61)

In this curious view of history, the early community is seen as properly stratified and classified after the pattern of the eleventh-century Islamic world, with distinct classes of rulers, scholars, and commoners, the true scholars being devoted to the inward sciences, leaving law and policy to the rulers and administrators. After the golden age of the "Four Rightly Guided" caliphs immediately after Muḥammad, the incapable caliphs desperately needed the *fuqahāʾ* to engage in worldly matters of jurisprudence and law, but the pious among them continued to avoid this-worldly matters (Ghazālī 2004:I, 61–62).

In this process, the key terms that used to be concerned with the hereafter alone in the time of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) became replaced by or overloaded with incorrect meanings. In particular, the meanings of key words such as *fiqh*, *ʿilm*, and *tawḥīd* became narrowed or corrupted. *Tawḥīd*, God's Oneness, which had now come

to mean disputations of *kalām*, raising of questions and doubts and silencing of opponents, used to mean "the seeing of everything as being from God in such a way that severed reliance on causes and intermediate means, such that they saw all good and evil being from none but Him the Exalted" (Ghazālī 2004:I, 50).

Some neologisms such as *shaṭaḥāt* ("ecstatic outbursts") of the Sufis and *tāmmāt* (lit., "perfections") of the Batinites are also chastised as meaningless or misleading. In his criticism of ecstatic outbursts (*shaṭaḥāt*) he writes that these are "boastful claims about [a] passionate love affair with God (*al-ʿishq maʿa Allah*) and *wiṣāl* (attainment) which render outwardly worship superfluous, to the point that some people have gone on to claim union (*ittiḥād*), the lifting of veils, direct visual contemplation (*mushāhada bi'l-ru'ya*) and conversation (with God)" (Ghazālī 2004:I, 54). Ghazālī has little patience for this:

> None can stop these idiots from such claims or from saying ridiculous and confused things, for if you try to, they retort, "Your attempt to prevent us is because of knowledge (*ʿilm*) and disputation (*jidāl*), and knowledge is a veil (from higher realities) and disputation is an act of the (appetitive) self. These words of ours cannot be seen except from within by the unveiling of the light of the Truth (*bi mukāshafat nūr al-ḥaqq*)." The evil of things like this has permeated through the lands, as has their harm for the commoners, to the extent that it would be better to execute anyone who says things of this kind than to save ten lives! (Ghazālī 2004:I, 50)

Interestingly, the arguments of the pretentious commoners whom Ghazālī dismisses and deems worthy of execution are very similar to his own arguments about the justification of similar claims. Furthermore, it would seem here that Ghazālī disapproves of ecstatic outbursts altogether, when in fact it is only the rowdy commoners (lazy peasants abandoning their fields and pretending to be love-struck mystics and beggars) whose antinomianism and social harm he is concerned about. He points out the conceited or fraudulent commoners, who pretend to be like al-Ḥallāj or al-Biṣṭāmī, who are known for such outbursts. But, surprisingly, he denies at this point in *Iḥyā'* that al-Biṣṭāmī ever engaged in these: "As for Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmi, God have mercy on him, such reports are false; and if it was heard from him, he was perhaps merely reporting from God" (Ghazālī 2004:I, 54–55). In his *Mishkāt*, however,

written shortly after *Iḥyāʾ*, he attributes such ecstatic outbursts reverently to the highest saints, the gnostics (*ʿārifūn*), at the end of attainment, just next to the prophets, who realize there is nothing in existence but God. Here he specifically mentions the outbursts ascribed to al-Ḥallāj ("I am Truth") and to al-Biṣṭāmī ("Glory to Me"). Clearly, he does not doubt the authenticity of attribution to al-Biṣṭāmī here (Ghazālī 1998:17–18, 51). This discrepancy can be attributed neither to diachronic development nor to pedagogical concerns, both of which are palpable factors in Ghazālī's corpus generally, but rather to thoroughgoing elitism, in which qualitatively different knowledge is considered suited for different kinds of recipients.

To sum up, although infused with Sufi themes and traditions, *Iḥyāʾ* prefers to emphasize *ʿilm al-ākhira* ("the science of the hereafter") rather than explicit Sufism, perhaps because it would have been much easier to connect to the *salaf* and to preach to the generality of Muslims. It may also be that for Ghazālī the advocacy of the relatively new movement of Sufism was not as critical as the deployment of Sufi themes in his own way in the intellectual struggles and disputes of the time, such as in *kalām*, the defense of Sunnism, and the revival of legal sciences. Regardless, *Iḥyāʾ* is not a return to the *salaf*, or akin to the Ḥanbalite rejection of post-*salaf* intellectual and spiritual developments, but rather the projection of Sufi spirituality onto the *salaf*, and then the presentation of *salaf* as models for reform. The message of *Iḥyāʾ* is also deeply elitist: the return to the way of the *salaf* does not resolve the intellectual challenges of the time, or even disclose the highest realities, but it is the best the commoners and the exoteric scholars can do. Written for the commoners, the tone and message of *Iḥyāʾ* are distinct from those of the *Mishkāt* and other philosophical and esoteric works.

To the problem of how the *salaf*, the best of all men according to the Sunni doctrine, could have been unaware of the rational sciences of *kalām* and spiritual mysteries of *mukāshafa*, Ghazālī has two answers. As far as *kalām* is concerned, they would have embraced it, as a necessary evil perhaps, as Ghazālī does, had they encountered its need (Ghazālī 2004:I, 139). As for *mukāshafa*, the essence of mysticism, the best of the *salaf* seem to have already possessed it, hence Ghazālī's insistence on a secret (*sirr*) in Abu Bakr's heart that made him superior to all others (Ghazālī 2004:I, 127). Esotericism and elitism, the cornerstones of Ghazālī's thought, are thus projected back onto the *salaf*.

Salaf and Ghazālīan Neoplatonism

Of the various mystical works Ghazālī wrote in the period after *Iḥyāʾ* and before his final retreat to his birth-town of Tus, one work, *Mishkāt al-anwār* ("The Niche of Lights"), is particularly important, and I argue that it presents a different picture of *mukāshafa* as well as the *salaf* than *Iḥyāʾ*.[4] Ghazālī's description of this divine light in *Iḥyāʾ* is perhaps deliberately elusive, but it is elaborated fully in his *Mishkāt* as well as in his other writings that employ explicitly Neoplatonist vocabulary. In this treatise, presumably written for the elite in response to a request to divulge some of these divine secrets, he hesitatingly begins to do so, impressing upon the questioner the enormity of the question he has asked, for "not all realities are to be elaborated and exposed, rather the breasts of free men (of God) are graves of secrets — as some gnostics (*ʿārifūn*) have said, 'divulging the secrets of Lordship is disbelief'" (Ghazālī 1998:1–2). Later in *Mishkāt*, he goes on to interpret some Qurʾanic references as well as the purpose of the spiritual endeavor in a clearly Neoplatonist way, in which the visible world is seen as "a ladder to the world of dominion (*malakūt*)" — this is clearly not metaphor for the scriptural concept of an afterlife, but reference to the gnostic path that Near Eastern mysticism sought in this very world. The emphasis is laid on relatedness (*munāsaba*) or similitude (*mithāl*) between the two worlds, which makes possible climbing from one to another. Parallel to the sun, the moon, and the stars in the visible world are angels in the world of dominion, which are explained as "luminous substances" (*jawāhir nūrāniyya*) (Ghazālī 1998:27). In *Maʿārij al-quds*, too, the attribution of which to Ghazālī has been disputed, the author interprets the "verse of Light" (Q 24:35) in an even more explicitly Neoplatonist way (quoted in Maḥmūd 1994:II, 180).[5] Such passages prompted Fazlur Rahman to comment that Ghazālī is profoundly incoherent,

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[4] Griffel 2009:9 points out the centrality of *Mishkāt* in prompting scholars in the twentieth century to reconsider Ghazālī's traditional self-presentation and suggests (2009:264–266) that it was written after *Iḥyāʾ*.

[5] *Maʿārij* has been considered spurious by scholars (e.g. Hourani 1984 does not mention it), but Griffel's recent study suggests that *Maʿārij*'s attribution to Ghazālī need not be questioned, because its arguments are in keeping with al-Ghazālī's theory of prophecy in his more authentic works; see Griffel 2009:138. Regardless, my present argument does not rely on *Maʿārij* but on Ghazālī's undisputed works.

because he excommunicates philosophers like Avicenna in some of his writings, "[b]ut then [there] follows the chapter on the 'characteristics of prophecy', which is almost word to word borrowed from Avicenna" (Griffel 2004:138; Rahman 1979:98). Ghazālī's critics, in particular Ibn Rushd, not surprisingly berated him for "hypocritically rejecting, or pretending to reject, on certain occasions what the *Mishkāt* and other works of Ghazālī espoused" (Davidson 1992:130).

The first part of *Mishkāt* presents a metaphysical discussion on the nature of light, while the second, more concrete for our purpose, presents a gradation of the human path to the divine, ostensibly based on an alleged prophetic tradition (mentioned in *Iḥyāʾ* in passing, Ghazālī 2004:I, 135), in which God is said to be veiled by seventy thousand, or seventy, veils of light and darkness. Ghazālī uses it to present his own classification of the human attitudes towards God into three kinds. Those of the first kind are veiled by pure darkness, such are those who do not believe in God, those of the second are veiled by light that accompanies some darkness, while those of the third are veiled by pure light (Ghazālī 1998:44ff.). Those of the first kind do not concern themselves with God at all, while those of the second include three subtypes: the first being limited to senses (worshipping God through idols, handsome humans, fire, celestial bodies, gods of light and darkness), the second limited by imagination, and the third by false rational analogies. In the second subtype, those limited by the veil of imagination, are included those who worship a deity who sits (*qāʿid*) on a throne, some even attributing a body to God (*mujassima*), while others deny a body but attribute directionality (*jiha*) — the latter being a Ḥanbalite position, although it is not named as such. The third subtype, limited by false analogies, includes those who deny directionality (*jiha*) to God as well but still analogize God's attributes to their own. What is interesting is that on this view not only these orthodox Sunni groups but the later *salaf* and the early Ashʿarites would be counted in the second or at best third category, making it barely above the fire-worshippers (Ghazālī 1998:66, n. 12, 13).

The third kind, those "veiled by sheer lights," is further divided into three types, but a fourth type is also added at the end. The first of these are those who know the meanings of the attributes through "verification" (Ghazālī 1998:50), which most likely means intellectual investi-

gation, namely *kalām*. They come to know that ascribing the attributes of "speaking," "desiring," etc., to God is different from ascribing those to other than God. This position captures the view of the later Ashʿarites, starting perhaps with Juwaynī. Next, superior to the Ashʿarites and nearer to the divine, are those who see God as a mover of the farthest celestial body:

> It becomes manifest to them that there is multiplicity in the heavens and that the mover of each specific heaven is a different existent thing called an "angel," of whom there are many. The angel's relationship with the divine lights is that of the stars. Furthermore, it appears to these people that these heavens are inside another celestial sphere that moves all of them by its movement once in a day and a night. Hence, the Lord is the mover of the furthest celestial body that envelops all the celestial spheres, since plurality is rejected as pertaining to the Lord. (Ghazālī 1998:50–51)

Passages like this confirm that Ghazālī employs Neoplatonist *concepts*, not merely Neoplatonist language for Islamic concepts.[6] The third subtype comprises those who hold that the Lord merely commands an angel to set things in motion; these people obviously realize that the Lord is too holy to act directly, the details of that command being too abstruse to be explained even in *Mishkāt*. Finally, the fourth type comprises the only ones "who have arrived" ("*wāṣilūn*"), who "have found Him too holy for and incomparable with all that we described earlier" (Ghazālī 1998:50–51). These *wāṣilūn* are divided into two groups; the first group sees that everything is annihilated but the observers of divine beauty and holiness remain; the next group, predictably, is itself erased, burned up, annihilated (Ghazālī 1998:52). These people represent the "ultimate end of those who have arrived" and are described by the word *ittiḥād* "unification." For their identity, Ghazālī refers us to his earlier discussion in the treatise where he mentions the *shaṭaḥāt* of al-Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī, "I am the Real" and "Glory be to me, how great is my station." This ultimate station of the *wāṣilūn* has been attained by the

6) This suggestion is in agreement with Griffel 2009:286 that "it is not convincing to argue, as Hava Lazarus-Yafeh did, that for al-Ghazālī, the technical language of emanation in Arabic had lost its emanationalist meaning."

Prophets Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad, too, although, we are told, the intermediate stages were not needed by the latter (Ghazālī 1998:52).

Ghazālī's gradation is quite revealing. If the history of *kalām* presented in the foregoing is recalled, it is not hard to notice that Ghazālī's scheme roughly matches the historical progression: the farthest from the real truth are the early Sunnis who opposed the Muʿtazila and affirmed God's attributes, as did the early Ashʿarites, followed by the later Ashʿarites (like Juwaynī, and Ghazālī in his earlier phase) who drifted towards the Muʿtazila on the issue of divine attributes; at the highest levels are not the *salaf* but the Neoplatonist mystic-philosophers, who deny any complexity or attributes to God. The true gnosis of God is directly proportional only to one factor: how transcendent God is when seen from the physical universe; dimensions such as worship, obedience, love, fear, righteous practice, that are dominant in the Qurʾān and the discourses of the *salaf*, are entirely absent. Indeed, on this view, the Batinites, ostensibly the despised enemies Ghazālī spent much of his career writing against, would be placed in the highest categories, above the *salaf* and certainly above their simplistic Sunni followers.

The *salaf* are not only absent from this account, but, given that none of them is recorded to have said anything about the celestial spheres, luminous lords, or about union with God, implicitly placed in the category veiled by layers of darkness, well under the Neoplatonist philosophers of various kinds, including Avicenna, his followers, and Sufi mystics. This prompts the question of whether the *salaf* were a ruse to sedate the commoners in *Iḥyāʾ* or simply a case of unresolved and unreflected contradictions.

Ghazālī's Pro-*Salaf* Finale: *Kalām* and *Iljām*

The resolution reached in *Iḥyāʾ* and the elitist hierarchy hinted at in the *Mishkāt* contrasts sharply with the teachings in Ghazālī's very last work, *Iljām al-ʿawāmm ʿan ʿilm al-kalām* (*Restraining the commoners against the science of kalām*), an alternative manuscript title for the same text being *Risāla fī madhāhib ahl al-salaf* (Epistle on the Teachings of the *Salaf*) (Griffel 2009:266). The message of *Iljām* is plain: all commoners must avoid engaging in *kalām*, restrict themselves to the arguments

provided in the Qurʾān, and follow the path of the *salaf*, who also restrained the commoners from such questions. (His sweeping definition of "commoners" will be considered shortly.) *Iljām* begins with a forceful endorsement of the school of the *salaf*:

> Know that the truth in which none endowed with wisdom may dispute is the school of the *salaf* (*madhhab al-salaf*), by which I mean the school of the Companions and the Followers. I will describe it and its evidence in the following. I say: the reality of the school of the *salaf*, which is the truth in our view, that any among the commoners (*ʿawāmm*) who receives any of these reports [about God's attributes found in Qurʾān or *ḥadīth*] must abide by seven things. (Ghazālī 1985:42)

These are, he goes on to list: the sanctification (*taqdīs*) of God, that is, the denial of God's corporeality; affirmation (*taṣdīq*) of the words of the Messenger; acknowledgement of one's incapacity to understand; silence (*sukūt*) from asking its meanings; reticence (*imsāk*), that is, not to go beyond the words [of the report] by way of interpretation, rephrasing, translation into a different language, or drawing any further implication; restraint (*kaff*) from even thinking about doing so; and finally, surrendering (*taslīm*) their meanings to those who know (*ahl al-maʿrifa*), and not imagine that their meanings are not known to the Messenger of God, upon him be peace, or to the *siddīqūn* (sing., *ṣiddīq*, lit., "affirmer of truth") or *awliyāʾ* (Ghazālī 1985:42). It should be noted that this view of the *salaf*'s position is that of Ghazālī, not necessarily corroborated by the *ḥadīth* scholars or by the historical record.

Elaborating on the requirement of reticence, Ghazālī writes, "For a commoner to attempt to interpret [the words of Qurʾān or *ḥadīth*] by himself is prohibited. It would be like someone not good at swimming diving into the deep ocean" (Ghazālī 1985:49). The passage that lists the commoners who must avoid interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of such reports is quite startling.

> In the meaning of commoners (*ʿawāmm*) is included the man of letters (*adīb*), of grammar (*naḥwi*), *muḥaddith*, *faqīh*, *mutakallim* — indeed, everyone with the sole exception of those who have exclusively devoted themselves to the learning of diving in the oceans of inner knowledge (*maʿrifa*), spending all their lives in that pursuit, turning away from this world and its desires, from wealth, power, all creation, and all pleasures, devoting themselves to God the Most High in

> knowledge and in deeds, abiding by all the prescriptions and etiquettes of the *sharīʿa*, emptying their hearts from all else but God the Most High, in rejection and scorn not only for this world but even for the hereafter and the Highest Paradise (*al-firdaws al-aʿla*) in comparison to the love of God the Most High. Such are the divers in the ocean of inner knowledge. And even these, with all this, are in grave danger which destroys nine out of ten of them. (Ghazālī 1985:49–50)

It is peculiar here that even a *mutakallim* is not supposed to engage in interpretation of reports about God's attributes, leaving us to wonder what else on earth one might do as a *mutakallim*. The only group that has at best a ten percent chance of properly interpreting these reports consists of those who abandon not only this world but also care little about the next, except for God. This is clearly a reference to the elite Sufi ideal. The philosophers, incidentally, are entirely absent from this list.

Much of the case in *Iljām*, it is clear from the title, is set primarily against the other Ashʿarites, especially those who would impose the obligation of speculative reasoning and metaphorical interpretation on commoners. In a pedagogical dialectic with the Ashʿarites who might have found his dismantling of the Ashʿarite tradition troubling, the *mutakallim* objector asks: What if the commoner would not incline towards the creed except by rational evidence? Ghazālī responds that only the evidence given in the Qurʾān may be given to the commoner (Ghazālī 1985:57). What is harmful and indeed a *bidʿa*, an innovation, is what the *mutakallims* have undertaken beyond presenting the Qurʾān's arguments (Ghazālī 1985:59–60).

Then Ghazālī considers what he had given as the only defense of *kalām* in his *Iḥyāʾ*, namely, the changing times and the need for using it as a tool against newfangled heresies. He goes on to provides a surprising barrage of arguments against his own case in *Iḥyāʾ* in a way that is hardly any different from that of the *ḥadīth* group: *kalām* is not merely unnecessary but harmful hair-splitting, which the early *salaf* (the Companions) did not develop or even hint at. This silence was not because they were incapable of doing so or because they avoided all theoretical or abstract matters — for they did indeed engage in abstract matters in the domain of law — but because they truly found this type of argumentation about theological matters harmful. Indeed, Ghazālī writes, they needed theological arguments in arguing against the Jews and the

Christians, but they preferred using "straight Qurʾānic arguments followed by the sword and the arrow" rather than develop or engage in *kalām* (Ghazālī 1985:60). Furthermore, rational defense misguides two for each one that it may guide, while the way of the *salaf* was to stop at the evidence given by the Qurʾān and then move to "the whip and the sword" for those who did not feel convinced (Ghazālī 1985:61).

This anti-*kalām* message in *Iljām* seems to be compromised by a parenthetical discussion in which Ghazālī offers guidelines on whether and under what conditions to make one's speculation about the meanings of verses about divine attributes public. This implicit allowance of such speculation seems to contradict the passionate and all-encompassing warning against it that forms the crux of the treatise. This could be understood in one of three ways: it is a plain contradiction; or it is meant for those who possess the aforementioned impeccable attributes and are allowed to engage in it (in which case, we may wonder why Ghazālī's advice is needed); or, finally, it is intended for those who cannot help engaging in inescapable speculation on divine attributes and other such matters because such questions seemed endemic in his times. This last, given Ghazālī's concern for pedagogy, seems most likely to be the case. Did Ghazālī change his opinion between writing *Iḥyāʾ* and *Iljām*, his last work? He mentions *Iḥyāʾ* approvingly later on in *Iljām* (Ghazālī 1985:67), which would suggest that Ghazālī sees no conscious break from his earlier position; *Iljām* is certainly not a recantation.[7] This does not preclude a gradual increase in disillusionment with *kalām* and the entire rational enterprise already palpable in *Iḥyāʾ*, which is what I suggest to be the most plausible explanation.

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[7] Griffel 2009:266–267 argues that indeed *Iljām* "is the work of a rationalist theologian, exploring how the rationalism of the religious elite can be taught to the ordinary people without causing any damage" to their afterlife or proper practice. I remain, however, unconvinced. For one, Griffel 2009:267 gives Ghazālī's definition of the commoners as "all those people who have not studied rationalist theology (*kalām*) and who would be unable to present arguments as to why the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in revelation cannot literally be true." However, Ghazālī's definition reproduced above explicitly includes the scholars of *kalām* among the commoners, and the description of the only exception matches that of the mystics, not theologians or philosophers.

Without suggesting, therefore, that Ghazālī abandoned esotericism and elitism in his last work, we may conclude that the metaphysical confidence of *Mishkāt* and other theosophical works is a far cry from the diffidence and humility towards philosophical speculation evident in *Iljām*. Unlike *Iḥyāʾ*, where *kalām* has an apologetic albeit unsafe role of defending others' faith while putting one's own faith on the line, so to say, in *Iljām kalām* plays no positive role; all one can do is to suggest remedies and controls for those given to such intellectual speculation. The attributes of God and other unseen realities are the domain of those rare mystical saints who have abandoned this world altogether and utterly devoted themselves to God, and even their chance of success is no more than one in ten.

The durability of the dilemmas that faced Ghazālī can be seen six centuries later in the writings of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1763), another tremendous intellect in the rationalist Sunni tradition who sought to create a grand synthesis of theology, philosophy, and mysticism with similar ambition and breadth (Ansari 1985:67ff.; Bajlon 1986:200–201). In eighteenth century Delhi, distant both in time and space from the golden age of the *salaf* and the theological disputes of Baghdad, Walī Allāh's attitude towards the Neoplatonist mystical philosophy, that Ghazālī had only harbingered and the eastern Illuminationist philosophy had consolidated, was much bolder and stable (see Bajlon 1986:4; Ziai 1990). A thoroughgoing Neoplatonist, Walī Allāh had no qualms about recognizing the radical propositions, barely implicit but never articulated even in Ghazālī's boldest writings, that the path of the *salaf* was not the only way to God, and that the paths of Sufism and theosophy (*ḥikma*) were distinct from and ultimately independent of the path of the *sharīʿa* (Walī Allāh 1974:121–129). He consistently considers the *salaf* and even the early Ashʿarites as *ummiyyun* — gentiles, simpletons, unaware or incapable of the real mystical and philosophical truths discovered only by later theosophists like Ibn ʿArabī, averring in Sufism and Illuminationist philosophy a fundamental epistemological break from the traditional way of the Prophet and the *salaf*, which the Prophet would have disliked had he known of it (Walī Allāh 1964:11–19). Unlike Ghazālī, for whom the Prophet ultimately taught the otherworldliness and mystical worldview that Sufism captured, Walī Allāh, a *ḥadīth* scholar as well as a much more

polished Sufi, acknowledges that the Prophet never taught Sufism and that he would have even disapproved of it. But this does not threaten Sufism at all; in eighteenth-century India, it is the *sharīʿa*, not Sufism, that needed defending. Sufism is just as valid in its capacity as a different path to God than the *sharīʿa*; it is not only valid but also perhaps nobler and closer to the ultimate truth, whose epistemological foundations and teleology (namely, its goals) are different from, even exclusive of, those of the exoteric *sharīʿa*.

It is hard to imagine a bolder break from the idea of the golden age of the *salaf* and an assertion of spiritual and intellectual progress, which nonetheless maintains the validity of the ways of the *salaf*, the simplistic early folk, by averring multiple paths, each with its own epistemology and set of rules. Thus, in Walī Allāh, the project that Ghazālī intimates in his bolder writings can be seen as having come to full fruition.

Conclusion

The tensions and conflicts in Ghazālī's corpus that have long been observed can be attributed to the ambitious synthetic nature of his project, as he tried simultaneously to embrace the cultural memory of the *salaf* while trying to adjust it within the Neoplatonist intellectual legacy of the Near East. The prospects of intellectual progress and the knowledge of ultimate realities that the philosophical and mystical traditions promised were too tempting to pass by. Unlike his teacher, Juwaynī, Ghazālī did not retreat to the way of the *salaf* for the sake of safety in afterlife, nor did he, however, reach a stable alternative of his own that could daringly break away from the cultural memory of the *salaf* as preserved in *ḥadīth* and the early Ashʿarite *kalām* circles. While espousing, at least during one phase of his life, a fundamentally Avicennan cosmology, albeit purged from doctrines he believed to be heretical, Ghazālī also sought to remain a Sunni and an Ashʿarite, who died a few days after having written a passionate but qualified appeal (*Iljām*) for the commoners, including the theologians, to return to (what he believed to be) the way of the *salaf*. Ghazālī employed different techniques in different phases of his writings to deal with the issue of the *salaf*, from the romanticization of the *salaf* as perfect Sufis along with a

qualified defense of *kalām* in *Iḥyāʾ*, to the relative negligence if not implicit denigration of the *salaf* with clear preference for the Neoplatonist theosophy in the more elite-oriented *Mishkāt*, to the relatively pro-*salaf* finale in *Iljām*. Rather than reject exoteric teachings, Ghazālī adopted an elaborate system of esotericism and pedagogical elitism in which different types of men were to be instructed in different teachings, each layer being true in its own way. The statements of revelation must be deemed true, although they have different meanings for people of different levels; that these different meanings may presume different epistemologies, and even require different cosmologies or ontologies, does not seem to deter Ghazālī. Nor is he willing to divulge the secret of how contradictory things might all be true.

In conclusion, it would seem that, at least in some cases, the "neutralizing" of evolutionary effects and foreign elements that Chaumont (EI² 1960–2006, s.v. "*al-Salaf waʾl-Khalaf*") attributes to the tendency he describes as "genuine traditionalism" has not taken place merely through "confident reliance on the past." Rather, much more conflict and contradiction can be seen before the keepers of tradition in posterity selectively preserve the memory of how the "orthodox" masters themselves struggled with the still earlier memory.

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